

## Harry Potter and the Muggle Mess

A/N: Just a small change sends ripples everywhere. Enjoy.

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Albus Dumbledore bent down to tuck a highly magical letter – to complete the warding around Number Four Privet Drive once Petunia read it...and to ensure she never had a moment's doubt about keeping Harry here – into Harry Potter's blanket when his well honed danger sense told him to move.

He reached out with his magical sensing capabilities and felt nothing. He took a step away from the baby. His senses screamed at him to depart.

Instead, curiosity overwhelmed his more primal instincts. He looked up and to the right just in time to see the shotgun blast that took off most of his head. "Freak!" a husky voice rang out. McGonagall watched her mentor rocket backward, dead.

She had her wand out and was casting a moment later. The window where the shotgun poked out of had become an angry badger. A bloody shotgun fell into the bushes near the door. Minerva shot forward, bent down, and plucked up young Harry faster than she'd moved in decades. She apparated away with her new charge.

It was a minor miracle she wasn't splinched or the baby wasn't injured. She hadn't a clear conception in her mind, but her unconscious mind had forced her to the Ministry of Magic. She got in the phone booth, such an uncomfortable contraption, and punched in the not-very-secret code.

When she and her charge arrived in the Atrium, there was only a lone, bored guard. "I need the Aurors," McGonagall shouted as soon as she exited.

The guard rocked back in his seat, evidently waking from a nap, and then stood up. "Who.... Professor McGonagall?"

“Call me an Auror, uh, Kentwick.”

She had taught for a decade now and had a bit of fame as a result. All the younger witches and wizards knew who she was if she had difficulty remembering all their names from time to time.

“Okay, ma’am.”

Within minutes, Minerva was in an interview room with Amelia Bones, recently named Head Auror, and Calish Burton, a man almost as scarred as Albus’ old friend Alastor Moody. They were covering for a large number of Aurors who were deep into their celebrations, libations, and copulations.

“Professor?” Amelia said, inviting McGonagall to explain herself.

“Albus Dumbledore is dead.” The words came out in a rush, almost too jumbled together to comprehend, but when she said it a second time, slower, she got a reaction.

Calish frowned and Amelia began to play with her monocle before she remembered herself and stopped.

“How?” Bones asked.

Minerva took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. “A shotgun, I think you call it.”

“Muggle?” Burton asked.

Minerva nodded.

“You’re saying the Chief Warlock who survived two Dark Lords has been felled by a muggle?” Amelia asked.

“Yes.”

“Explain,” Amelia Bones said.

“This baby,” Minerva said, holding up Harry Potter, “is the son of James and Lily Potter....”

“The Boy-Who-Lived?” Burton blurted.

Minerva nodded. “Albus was taking him to his last known relative, the squib sister of Lily Potter. He had set the boy down and then someone shot him from the second floor.”

“I need an address,” Burton said.

Minerva gave him detailed instructions. Burton left the room while Amelia Bones asked more questions. The more she heard about Dumbledore’s plan for Harry Potter, the less she liked it.

“You taught the Potters,” Amelia Bones said.

“Yes.”

“And you worked with them in the Order of the Phoenix?” That was an open secret.

“I was an adjunct, not a proper member,” she said. Dumbledore had told her she would need to survive for Hogwarts if he were ever killed. Planning like that, as gruesome as it sounded, was a fact of wartime.

“They had a will?”

“Lily mentioned it, threatening to take Sirius Black off the list of potential guardians for her son.”

Amelia Bones blinked. “Black, eh? Nasty rumor floating around about him right now. Wouldn’t happen to know where I can find him?”

“I can message him.”

Amelia smiled a bit. “That clever Patronus variation. Go ahead.”

Minerva drew her wand, wondered exactly how many Ministry spies had been in the Order, and jostled a sleeping Harry. He cracked open

an eye and seemed destined to cry before he crashed back into dreamland.

Amelia held out her hands. "I have care over my niece now, Minerva. I know how to handle small children."

The Transfiguration Mistress handed the baby to the Head Auror. She cast her spell and a flash of silver sped off. "Now we wait...."

But not for long. A silvery, monster-sized tropical bird zipped into the interrogation room. "Busy, am hunting a rat," Sirius' voice emerged from the Patronus.

"A rat?" Amelia asked.

Minerva shrugged.

"Send him another Patronus. Tell him his godson is at the Ministry. If he cares at all about anyone but himself, that should be enough," Amelia said.

Minerva sent the message and the spell zoomed off. Amelia tried not to coo at Harry, but she did end up making a rather cute face when the boy's eyes fluttered open again. He blinked a couple of times and then conked out again.

"Did Dumbledore put this child under a sleep charm?"

Minerva didn't know.

Amelia handed Harry back to Minerva and went to the Floo in main office. She called over a Healer. The rather ancient man tumbled through the Floo about the same time that Sirius Black walked into the department.

"What's this about Harry, Professor?" he said as soon as he laid eyes on Minerva.

Minerva lifted the baby a few inches. Sirius stumbled over toward him. Amelia Bones watched him approach, like he was very angry or very

drunk, and cast a petrifying spell at him. His arms seized up and he fell to the floor. "You won't be touching that baby, Mr. Black, until I get a complete story from you. Rumors have a way of becoming truth if they're not taken care of."

The Healer looked at everything with a bit of surprise etched on his face. "Might I examine the young boy?"

Amelia pointed toward the room Minerva had just stepped out of with Harry.

Amelia Bones levitated Sirius to a different interrogation room and sealed the door behind her.

Minerva stood out in the hall, with so many empty desks in every direction. She watched the Healer cast spells and make unhappy noises from time to time. Eventually he cast a charm on Harry and the boy conked out again. He turned around and stalked over to Minerva.

"Is he your grandchild?"

"No. He's Harry Potter...."

"Right. Well, I guess that explains some of what I observed. Good thing you weren't related, I might have to push for Child Welfare to lock you away for gross negligence...."

"What?" Minerva asked.

"No one should cast those kinds of spells on a young child. No one...."

"Back up. What spells?"

The Healer grunted and his face went stony. "Where's the Auror who called me here? This is something she needs to hear, I think!"

Minerva pointed to the sealed door. "She's got a quick...interview."

“Fine. I’d rather sit here. Not a good evening tending idiots too soused to apparate properly...but a better day than dealing with Death Eater damage.”

Minerva examined the Potter child from head to toe. She could see nothing wrong, but a Healer’s magic could look inside. “Is Harry okay?” she asked.

“That’s a matter of opinion. We’ll need specialists....”

“From St. Mungo’s?”

He shook his head. “From the Department of Mysteries.”

“What?”

“I’ve said too much,” the Healer said, before pulling out a chair from someone’s desk and sitting down on it. “I’ll wait here and then I can make the referral.” He looked around the empty floor. “Bet a bunch of the no good drunks I worked on were Aurors. Bunch of overpaid knuckledraggers.”

Minerva retreated to the room with a sleeping Harry Potter laid on a table.

The evening had begun in joy tempered with loss, devolved into terror and anger, and now...it was baffling and not a little perverse.

He sat down in the chair and finally let loose the tears that had not come before. First shock and fear kept them at bay, then her need for justice and retribution. In this moment of calm, she had no purpose and her body did as it wanted.

Eventually, the tears stopped and she grasped Harry in her arms. “You...poor child...no family amongst the living...you’ll be famous for something you can’t remember and it will be tied with the deaths of your parents...forever and ever sentenced to remember something beyond your memory...and now a third murder in your presence, the most powerful wizard of our age, dead...and you will never remember this, either...what a life fate has made for you.”

That got her crying again. Only Amelia Bones walking back into the room with Sirius Black and the Healer from St. Mungo's stopped her tears. "Sorry." She hiccupped. "It's been a bad day."

Amelia nodded. Sirius said nothing, but his eyes were still shiny, glassy, proof of his testimony under a truth agent. He just sat on a chair. A few moments later, the dour Healer entered the room.

"You're that disgraced Black, aren't you?"

Sirius nodded his head. "I can't believe people think I could have betrayed James and Lily. Madam Bones, you have got to get a team set on finding Peter Pettigrew. He did this. I set the switch to him, because it seemed clever, but my idea allowed this disaster to happen. I didn't kill my dearest friends, but I have that guilt on my soul."

"I have a plan for that," Amelia said. "And it won't involve chasing an animagus through the countryside for days. So, Sirius, I suspect the Potter will name you as Harry's guardian. Minerva, you may remain, if you wish, as the concerned citizen who brought him here. And Healer Marchnesse, your report? Is Harry healthy?"

"He's not...."

"What?" Sirius bellowed.

Amelia glared at the impetuous wizard and he shut his yob for a moment.

"He has some kind of spell damage I've never seen before – likely from his surviving an assassination attempt." Minerva began to cry again. "He is also covered in a series of rather old charms, things related to setting and fixing wards. My expertise in this matter only goes so far, but I recognize a few of them. You see some of these wards used in prisons in North America, power limiters and such...."

Sirius snatched his godson away from Minerva when it looked like she might drop him.

“Where do we begin to unravel this?” Amelia asked.

“This is beyond the expertise of St. Mungo’s to reverse. I should know, I’ve been a Spell Damage reversal specialist there for fifty years. But...I think we must call in the Unspeakables....”

Even Sirius looked stunned at that. Those Ministry employees had a bad reputation. Amelia looked like she wanted to object.

“Enough,” the Healer said. “I’ve heard the rumors, too. They’re not high level assassins or arcane librarians. They’re people who specialize in investigations that straddle the borders of magical disciplines, things most people don’t even consider. Like how quirks of medical charms can malfunction with different sorts of wards – or a rather distasteful experiments keeping muggle brains alive after the rest of the body experiences a fatal disability. Tentacles and such, ghastly things, but they can’t be killed now it seems. They also keep track of sensitive magics, such as anything related to temporal magic and to genuine prophetic utterance. My brother was one of them before he perished in 1974 so I know what I’m talking about!”

“You want them to experiment on Harry?” Sirius asked, in a dead calm voice that screamed menace.

“Experiment, no. I want to find the one or two Unspeakable who understand medicine and wards – or who have experimented with the aftereffects of the Killing Curse. It doesn’t just kill; it has to do something. Someone there – or some journal in their library – may know what it does and if there is a theoretical way to...undo it.”

“Call down there,” Amelia said. “You know who to call?”

“I knew the right people in 1974. If they’re still there, then I know who to call,” the cagey old man said.

He went out and knelt in front of the fireplace. Amelia stayed with Sirius, Minerva, and Harry.

She looked at the distraught young man. "Am I going to have to confine you to keep you from going after Pettigrew again?"

"No, ma'am. As long as you promise to catch him."

An evil smile cracked her weathered face. "I do."

The Healer walked back into the room. "The on-duty Unspeakable at this hour had a good idea of who to call. The woman is being roused out of bed as we speak."

"I don't like this," Sirius said.

"Medical treatments for children are always painful for their guardians. Always."

The fire in the open room flashed orange, a color no one in the conference room had ever seen before, and then a short person in a full length gray cloak stepped out. Gracefully. The fire returned to its normal sedate yellow.

The healer stood up and walked out of the conference room through the open door. "Merlinda, thank you for coming."

"This had better be good."

"It's a tough thing, what I found, magic bent and twisted in ways it's not supposed to be."

Amelia Bones cleared her throat and said, "Please speak clearly. I represent the Aurors, Sirius Black is the boy's godfather, and Ms. McGonagall happened to rescue him from a dangerous situation." She left unsaid, of course, that McGonagall had permitted the dangerous situation to occur, but not many people could have changed Albus Dumbledore's mind once he set it to a cause.

The Healer nodded. "Fine. I will be as plain as I can. The spell damage is centered around that scar. It's reminiscent of the energy lingering after a person dies of the Killing Curse, but it's different, too,

more intense. Then there are the charms on the boy which I suspect are intended to be anchors for a warding schema....”

“Involuntary blood wards?” the Unspeakable asked.

The Healer had a deep frown when he nodded.

“Let me take a look.” The woman in the gray robe pulled out an odd looking wand, matte gray, not constructed of wood, and less than six inches in length. She cast a few nonverbal spells, waiting five seconds between each casting.

When she finished, she tucked her wand away in her cloak. “The Unspeakables will take on this case.”

“What?” Sirius asked. “That’s all you have to say. What’s wrong with Harry?”

“You are of the Main Line Blacks?”

Confused, Sirius shook his head.

“Have you spent much time in the notorious library your family maintains?”

“In the past, yes.”

“Did you ever study soul magic?”

“No, that’s a disgusting idea,” Sirius said.

“Apparently the disgusting Dark Lord so recently vanquished didn’t share your revulsion. The child has been enchanted with a fragment of a soul not his own....”

Minerva fainted. Amelia blanched and the color drained from even her hands. The Healer was left speechless.

Sirius just blinked a few times trying to understand all of this, what it meant.

“Anything enchanted can be disenchanting. The few writers who looked into this particular form of enchantments suggest the brute force method of disenchantment: destroy the vessel....”

“No!” “Not Lily and James’ baby....” There were horrified reactions all around the table. “This cannot be the only option.”

“Remember, there are many poor methods to solve a problem but usually only one or a small number of elegant options. An Unspeakable solved this problem one hundred ten years ago, during the Bethune Insurgency....”

The room was quiet and confused. No one save the Unspeakable knew what the Bethune Insurgency was...and all the uninitiated were thinking about this ‘elegant option’ to free Harry from his curse or enchantment.

“When can you do this?” Sirius asked, not even wanting to know the details.

“The half-formed warding hooks will have to be pried apart....”

“The what?” Sirius almost growled.

“The enchantments to indirectly anchor wards. They’re called warding hooks, ridiculously complex magic that. Direct anchoring is a different and less complex process... But that’s neither here nor there. Please listen and stop interrupting, Mr. Black.”

“Go ahead,” Amelia Bones said.

“The short of it is we can get the child into a ritual room in the Department of Mysteries and have this resolved within, oh, three hours or so.”

The table fell quiet and contemplative. Minerva looked up first.

“What are the risks?” she asked.

“Do we know who cast the ward hooks?” the Unspeakable asked.

“Probably Albus Dumbledore....”

The Unspeakable seemed to snort. “An amateur, then. Jack of many trades, master only of Transfiguration. The risk is not zero...if Dumbledore made errors in his casting.”

The Unspeakable stopped to let Minerva speak. She looked ready to explode. “He died tonight, my good friend.”

“I am sorry to hear it,” the Unspeakable said. “The world has lost an inquisitive mind, but his skill level with these kinds of magics is well known to us. Just look at the state of the wards and protective nets at Hogwarts. According to our analysis, they haven’t been in this poor a condition since Phineas Black was Headmaster.”

“Enough,” Minerva shouted, waking Harry for a brief moment. “Enough. Talk about the child. And this ritual you propose to do.”

The Unspeakable shrugged. “There is a risk. I have a few colleagues who should be able to unravel the wards, no matter what or how well he crafted them. The greater risk is the unintentional enchantment, the one left by the insurrectionist.”

“Who?” Sirius asked.

“Voldemort,” the Healer responded.

“Who has rights for the child?” the Unspeakable asked.

“I do.” Sirius nodded. “I want my godson, my best friend’s son, to be completely healthy.”

The gray cloaked head nodded several times. “I will make contact with the others then. Walk with me down to the Department of Mysteries. We will not Floo with such a child in such a state....”

Minerva rose to accompany the Unspeakable and Sirius, but the cloaked woman stopped her. "Thank you for your care, but we need only one guardian for the proceedings."

"Amelia?" Minerva said.

"It's alright. I hope."

"It will be," the Healer said. "This is not the first referral I've made to the secretive branch. Every case, so far, has turned out well."

Minerva nodded and watched the cloaked woman, Sirius Black, and a small child walk out of her sight.

Before Minerva had a chance to return to her mourning, Auror Burton returned. "It's done."

"Confirmation?" Amelia asked.

"A male Muggle, Dursley, I think, fired the shotgun. Per the Separation Accord, I executed justice...."

"You killed him?" Minerva asked. "What about a trial?"

"A muggle killing a wizard is sentenced to death, effective immediately. It's one of our oldest laws."

"Even that monster deserved a trial," Minerva said. "What about...err, Petunia? And the child? And Dumbledore's body?"

"She had her memory modified. Thinks her husband ran away with his mistress and left her in the lurch with her fat baby. And Dumbledore's remains have been removed. He's downstairs for the time being. We'll need to access his will in the morning to see what should happen."

Minerva sighed. "I see. If that's all...."

Amelia nodded. "I'm sorry, Minerva. I'm very sorry. Please let me know if I can do anything to help."

"I'll have to tell the students in the morning. The school spent all day rejoicing over the end of Voldemort...now this tragedy, such a stupid thing."

The Healer stood up. "Well, I'm no longer needed here. Glad I could be of help."

He moved out of the room before he could hear the appreciative words from Bones and McGonagall. The Floo fired up and he disappeared, back to St. Mungo's.

"Good night, Minerva."

The aged teacher rose and walked out of the room. She headed to the Floo and said, "Hogwarts Deputy Headmistress." The fire flashed and she stepped through.

Amelia beckoned her colleague Burton to sit. "Tell me everything."

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Millicent Bagnold sat in her office at six in the morning. She just barely kept the lid on her surprise at the news she was hearing. Dumbledore dead? Black innocent of the rumors about him? The Unspeakables performing some kind of cursebreaking on the Boy-Who-Lived....

But the current report was perhaps the most mind blowing. "You want what, Bones?"

"I want to coopt the Underage Magic Office. I can make some good use of their magical sensors, I think."

"That's got to be the most useless office in the Ministry – well, maybe the Muggle Office is worse. That man Woозley is an imbecile. I don't get it...."

Amelia pressed on gently. "Dumbledore insisted we couldn't use the sensors to search for conflicts. I don't know why he defeated the

several emergency bills, but he shot the idea down. Now that he's passed, we can put those sensors to use."

Bagnold frowned. "You know they're junk – by design. There are so many Wizengamot rulings and laws, it's a contradictory mess. The only people we're sure we can track are underage muggleborns. There are so many exemptions and loopholes...."

Amelia nodded. "I also need a Letter of Authorization to retune everything. I want to track down anyone using an Unforgivable, anyone performing an Animagus transformation, and anyone using a Portkey. The Unforgivables we immediately dispatch for, the Animagus and Portkey issues we research and fine the ones who are illegal...."

"This is awfully specific. You're searching for something...."

"I got a good tip about a Death Eater or sympathizer. Illegal animagus. Could be the one who betrayed the Potters...."

"Really? Hmm, good ammunition that, should I need it. Fine. I always thought that office and its six staffers was a waste of resources. They'll be absorbed into the DMLE. Permanently. Weed out the useless ones...and see if you can make those damned sensors perform any useful functions."

"Gladly."

"I wonder if I could do something to make the Muggle Office useful. Want them, Bones?"

"Not today, Minister."

A merry, devious smile remained on the Minister's face. "Hmm. Anything else?"

"We're beginning the roundup of suspected sympathizers...."

"I don't have to tell you to be careful, do I? A cornered animal...."

“Yes, I know. I’ll be leading the assault on Malfoy Manor sometime this evening.”

The Minister felt an involuntary shiver on her back. “Best deal with him early, before he has a chance to pour honeyed words....”

“...and his dead father’s Galleons...,” Amelia added.

“...into our reputable, estimable Wizengamot.”

“I’ll contract with a few people I know to begin investigations into all of them.”

Millicent smiled but said nothing. Tacit consent. She could deny, deny, deny ever authorizing anything like it, should the secret burst. A politician’s life wasn’t a clean one.

“Good hunting,” the Minister said. “Malfoy, I mean. Be safe.”

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“Hear ye, hear ye, the Court of Magical Laws known as the Wizengamot is called into session. Griselda Marchbanks, Chief Witch, presiding over the legislative session.”

The scribe finished his measured shouting into the large, somewhat empty chamber.

There were eighty seven authorized members – some appointed to lifetime seats by the Wizengamot as a whole, some elected to ten year terms by adult witches and wizards of the realm, some appointed by the Minister of Magic to three year, renewable terms, a complicated system even on its best days – but only thirty two were present today. The remainder were in cells awaiting interrogation.

It was rather disturbing how even persons who weren’t marked with Voldemort’s Dark Mark regularly used Unforgivable Curses in their daily lives. The sensors had been adjusted for only three days and the sweep was very thorough, even if none of the Elders had yet been informed of Minister Bagnold’s Letter of Authorization.

“Point of order,” a large man sitting near the front railing said.

“The chair recognizes Elder Brownway.”

“Thank you. My question is can we proceed with so few members present today?”

Chief Witch Marchbanks nodded and then looked to the scribe. “We have no quorum requirement, sir,” was the answer.

“Fine,” Marchbanks said, “to business. Issue one is the Potter child. The Potter will was sealed by our late Chief Warlock and I would like a formal vote to unseal it.”

Breaking an official action of one Head of the Wizengamot was the purview of any successors, but Griselda was playing a political game. She needed Dumbledore to fall from his pedestal quickly so that she wouldn’t spend all her time being compared to the miserably smug young man.

“Did Albus leave any notes as to why he sealed it?” a gray-haired witch asked.

“No. But he also sealed the wills of eighteen other families, none of whom are dead.”

That statement left Albus’ ordinary defenders knocked off their game.

“You think he sealed the Potter will before the Potters died?” an ancient wizard called Mortimer Prewitt asked.

Griselda nodded. Such an action – abrogating the wishes of the living – was clearly illegal.

“I move to unseal all of them,” Elivra Twaddle said.

An acclamation broke out among the other members. No vote needed.

“So be it,” Marchbanks said. “I will present the unsealed Potter will to a solicitor and ensure the instructions are carried out, especially as regards the Potter heir.”

The harried scribe tried to get it all down on parchment before the next matter began.

“Now, Elder Marchbanks, what progress on the Death Eaters?” the youngest Wizengamot member, Henry Divion, asked.

Marchbanks looked to Barty Crouch, Sr., Director of Magical Law Enforcement. He stood and said, “We have forty two Death Eaters and sympathizers in custody. It’s taking some time to conduct the interrogations as most of our people are in the field trying to catch the remaining known parties. Those being Lucius Malfoy, whose manor we have attempted to penetrate three times now, and the remaining Lestrangle family members.”

“When should we expect the first trials?”

Barty didn’t notice who asked the question and didn’t much care. He shrugged. “We’re trying to sort out the claims of the Imperius Curse being used extensively. The Veritaserum makes them tell the truth about what they know, but we haven’t figured out a way to get them to admit they were acting of their own volition....”

“How about, ‘Were you acting of your own volition?’” one smart mouthed member called out.

“Any pressure brought to bear at all would permit the Death Eater to, truthfully, say he was under pressure,” Crouch responded. “We have some experience with these matters, I assure you.”

Marchbanks snorted in a rather unladylike manner. “I want medical tests, Barty. Get them to agree to a battery of tests to see if the Death Eaters did have them under the Imperius Curse. If they wish to be acquitted for involuntary actions, they must have the tests....”

“Excuse me, but does St. Mungo’s have any tests that would identify exposure to the Imperius?” a brightly painted matron asked.

"If they don't, they will," Barty responded, pleased with the idea.

"Will it work?" the heckler called out again.

"Only the innocent and the most brazen liars will go for it. Then we can sort out the rest of the mess later," Griselda said. "We'll get rid of half or more of the claimants."

Crouch nodded and then returned to his seat.

Griselda opened the floor to proposals for new or amended laws. There wasn't much of interest: a few trying to shore up protections for various pseudo monopolies they held on various industries, a few trying to take advantage of so many newly dead families by stripping away previously granted privileges and awarding them to themselves, a bunch of self interested malarkey.

She'd deal with all this crud in committee – and gut all of it. Dumbledore never bothered with the details and had let much corruption work its way into an already befouled set of laws. Griselda figured she had another thirty or forty years of good health left. Should be enough time to undo a good amount of damage from a hundred years of idiot wizards running this place.

"Any other business?" she called out.

"I have," Eleanor Smith said, rising to her feet. It was well known she was a distant cousin, by marriage, to the extinguished Hufflepuff line. She had no Hufflepuff blood in her, but such a connection still gave her a good deal of clout. "I submit a proposal to invoke magical oaths for all government officers and Wizengamot officials. This horrible war drug on so badly for so long because we had traitors sitting amongst in discussing policy in this very chamber. I will not have it happen again!"

"Oaths?" Elder Brownway rose to say. "We are the government...how we can we swear an oath that will be useful?"

Before Smith could respond another witch shouted out, “That’s mind control. It’s just as bad as the Imperius you’re proposing.”

Griselda waved the disgruntled crowd silent. “Perhaps, Elder Smith, you could provide us with more of the proposed details. For example, what is the wording of the oath and who would need to take it?”

“Certainly, Chief Witch. It’s a simple oath. ‘I swear on my magic that my first loyalty is to the common welfare of Magical Britain. I will resign any and all offices or relationships with the Ministry of Magic, Hogwarts, St. Mungo’s, or the Diagon Alley Commerce Guild before I may join up with or offer material or informational support to any person or organization professing to destabilize or terrorize our civilization or any segment of it.’ It’s not mind control. People can do what they wish, but they cannot be two-faced about it. Want to join up with a terrorist, fine, but you have to leave your government job and your influence behind. No more getting your good buddy off a severe charge just because you happen to be an Auror serving two or more masters.”

Griselda nodded, considering the proposal, and then smiled. “This is a good bill, I think. I’ll move it to fast track consideration. We will have preliminary debate next Thursday.”

She hoped that setting the session in two days wouldn’t give any detractors time to get the missing Elders back in time to vote against it. She needn’t have worried. The population of the Wizengamot would only shrink between this day and the day of the vote.

“Anything else?” Griselda Marchbanks asked. “No, we reconvene tomorrow at eight. Session adjourned.”

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The Aurors were gathered in the ready room. Major briefings were held here and raids were staged here, as well. Tonight the target, for the fourth time, was Malfoy Manor. The team sitting on the home reported that Lucius Malfoy had returned and raised the wards to full intensity.

Not the action of an innocent man, even if Malfoy's solicitor kept sending letters requesting a non-judicial hearing for Lucius so he could explain how he was under the Imperius Curse almost continuously for the last five years.

The legal hack, of course, demurred on having Lucius report for an exam at St. Mungo's.

Amelia Bones walked into the room, wearing her dragon scale armor gifted her by her brother upon her graduation from the Auror Academy.

"Fourth time will be the charm," she said. "The plan is to have Kurtz' team start the ward sappers at the northeast corner. Our cursebreakers adjudged that the weak spot in the array. With luck we should get secure collapse in under five minutes. Stunners authorized unless we have lethal spellfire returned...."

The Floo in the corner flashed red. A head emerged, "Auror Bones, Cruciatus detected at the Longbottom Manor."

Amelia paused for a moment before gesturing Plank One through the fire. "We'll catch up to Lucius another day. Time to help out one of our own. Lethal spells authorized."

The team opened the Floo and jammed the connection open. Less than a minute later, twelve Aurors were inside the manor and had engaged a small number of enemies. By the time Amelia stepped through, she saw one downed Death Eater and three still fighting. Frank Longbottom was unconscious on the staircase.

Amelia joined in the firefight. The crazed Death Eater cackled in glee and downed one of Amelia's Aurors. She took off her kid gloves. She sent a Killing Curse at the Death Eater – and the woman dodged at the last second. Her luck ran out when three other Killing Curses impacted her a moment later.

For an Auror, it was one thing to be told it was permitted to use lethal spells. It was another to actually use them. Amelia had freed their mental restraints by casting what she did.

She turned to look at the other bits of the battle. One Death Eater fell to a cutting curse through his arm and shoulder. The final one roared in fury. He killed an Auror before two Killing Curses knocked him off his feet, dead as could be.

Amelia counted the scene. Four down Death Eaters, still masked. Four dead Aurors, no severely wounded, minor cuts and scratches all around from ducking and landing on the devastated stone floor, rock chips everywhere.

A baby cried and Catherine MacKinnon, the last of her line, ran up the stairs. "He's up here. So is Alice, she's in bad shape."

Aurors had unmasked the four Death Eaters. Three Lestranges...and Barty Crouch's son.

It wouldn't be a pretty scene in an hour back in the Ministry. Bagnold would have Crouch gone...and Amelia wasn't sure if she wanted a promotion this soon in her career. She closed her eyes and then turned to begin a field diagnostic on Frank Longbottom.

Severe exposure to Cruciatus.

There were many other torture curses, some with worse pain than the Cruciatus, but nothing could completely melt down a nervous system like that one could.

Catherine stepped out on the balcony and waved a few of her colleagues up the stairs. Alice needed assistance.

Amelia got the results on Frank. He would recover. The exposure had been interrupted early enough. She turned and walked back to the locked fireplace. There were additional Aurors looking on, waiting to follow orders. "Get St. Mungo's. We need three Healers. Two with Cruciatus exposure, severe. An infant, condition unknown."

One of the Aurors ran from the ready room to use a different Floo.

"A Lestrangle is dead?" a young Auror called Marcus Brant asked.

“All three of them. Plus another we didn’t know about. Get ahold of Bagnold and Barty Crouch. Tell them the Longbottoms are safe, but get them into the Auror conference room. Right?”

“Got it, boss.”

Politics wasn’t something Amelia loved. She’d gotten into this line to help people, but the higher she rose, the fewer people she saw or helped.

She stepped back from the fire when she saw the Healer Response Team come into the ready room.

They emerged from the fire, dusted their no-longer-white jackets, and looked around. Amelia pointed to Frank and said, “Alice Longbottom and her child are upstairs, I believe. A few of my team are already up there.”

These Healers, who’d trained at the Auror Academy for several months over the last few years, knew how to work under combat conditions. A minimum of speaking, brutal efficiency, and prompt evacuation to a known safe environment were the keys to longevity.

It took only minutes for Frank, Alice, and tiny Neville to be whisked away from the home. It took much longer to locate the hidden room where Augusta Longbottom, Frank’s mother, had secreted herself.

The woman had the gall to demand explanations when she had abandoned her grandchild. Amelia didn’t have much patience for the stern, self-involved woman.

“Augusta, you went to school with my father. He may be gone now, but I have a pensieve full of his memories – some of you. I think it’d be best you shut your gob right now. Understand.”

Immediately the angry woman went quiet. She nodded and then began to walk, almost in a daze, toward the Floo, toward St. Mungo’s.

Amelia took no pleasure in the words she said. Brutual efficiency ruled this evening. If Augusta had to have several misconceptions cleared away – namely that her own indiscretion in her youth had survived the death of Hubert Bones III – then so be it.

She stayed at the scene another hour, finding only three terrified house elves. Her team wasn't able to locate how the still intact wards had been penetrated, either.

Given four now dead Death Eaters, they wouldn't have an easy time reconstructing tonight's events, either.

Amelia waited until her team was done, before she stepped in the floor, walked into her ready room, and terminated the steady connection between the Longbottom Manor and this secure Floo.

Tonight was a costly victory, very costly. Malfoy could wait for another night. She had Bagnold to brief, Crouch to interrogate, and the families of four Aurors to notify. And she had foolishly thought the war over. And become sloppy to some degree.

Such an impulse had cost Dumbledore and now eight additional Aurors their lives. The greatest wizard of the age felled by a muggle – not officially, of course, as the report said his heart failed. Slytherin and Ravenclaw students who barely based their NEWTs in wandless subjects so rigorously drilled in combat curses, and little else, that they could kill Aurors who had impeccable academics and years of training.

The aftermath was almost as bad as the height of the conflict. How to pick up the pieces when all the rotted seams finally gave out?

Amelia sighed as she stepped out of the ready room and walked into a secure conference room. She raised the privacy wards and began her briefing. Her fingers never left the wand she carried up her sleeve.

Not even after Barty Crouch burst into tears at the news of his son's death.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Twenty eight men and women – referencing the union of the critical magical numbers seven and four – fell silent when the room sealed. The few sitting stood up and removed their cloaks. Everyone else divested themselves of the nuisance of their public attire.

This sealed space was a safe space. The hours on this Tuesday morning were among the few given to them to interact with each other as witches and wizards, to drop the mystique, to speak plainly and clearly.

This year's lead Unspeakable was named Crawley. The election for next year wasn't for another three months, but he suspected he'd miss the few administrative tasks he had to supplement his work in the realm between rituals, divination, and necromancy. While he was a specialist in dark wizarding lore, especially things like the Deathly Hallows and the Misericordian Bloom, he'd loved the simple task of interviewing the dozen people for open slots in the Department of Mysteries. Only one of them had worked out and that woman, Vivienne Darkbloom, was now present in this room.

"Right. Let's get started. What have we learned in the last week?" It was the traditional opening to the meeting. Once a month or so, something truly interesting presented itself. This week that honor fell to Merlinda.

"I had the unique honor of coming across a horcrux embedded in a living person...."

That got the room's attention.

"The theory doesn't support that," the balding Ulric Candlemass stated.

"Damn the theory," Amadeus Paulus said, "I was there when we extracted the blasted thing. Almost took my hand off."

"Really?" seemed to be the general consensus. This was the shiniest toy discussed in this room since Ermeldine Casastrove discovered,

and survived, the unique reaction that occurred when a time turner was blasted by a muggle bomb back in 1944.

Merlinda smiled and nodded. She kept on smiling until there was a general groaning in the room.

“Details, woman, details!” came the cry from Helen Greengrass-Smythe.

“Fine,” the young witch said, smiling even wider. “My godfather called me at home and told me he had something for me to look at – a child....”

“Who?” asked someone in the back.

“Harry Potter....”

“What?” the leader Unspeakable Crawley squeaked out. “The greatest magical phenomena of our age – the surviving of a Killing Curse – is tied into a second one?”

“If I can finish my story?” The room fell quiet. “My godfather asked me to consult. I went to the Auror Office and did a nine layer scan on the boy. I had only come across a horcrux before when I began examining items seized from various Gringotts excavations in Egypt. Rather lucky, too, don’t think we have anyone studying the phenomenon these days....”

Crawley looked around and said, “We don’t.” He now expected at least two people to work up a project in the coming week.

“Yes, so I gave the room the bare bones explanation, spending more time on these poorly constructed ward hooks that apparently Dumbledore had layered on the boy....”

That brought the room to mutters again. Albus Dumbledore was not well liked in these parts, given his continual attempts to crack open the secrecy agreement and get a look at what happened down here – or to plant his chosen spies as employees – or to withhold financial support every few years – and the list went on.

“Just like you idiots, that dour Hogwarts professor, and the disinherited Black heir, and that Bones woman were terribly distracted by the shiny accusation I made. Very entertaining. So, I brought him and the Black down here and got a few of you to assist in the seven cleansing rituals and the disenchanting. The theoretical construct we’ve had on the books works, but it’s not as foolproof as we had theorized. We may need more work....”

“Was the Potter boy harmed?” Crawley asked. In the decentralized system they used, the lead Unspeakable only heard of things if new resources were needed, such as larger or more securely warded rooms, or during these weekly meetings. He was as shocked as everyone else.

Merlinda would be dining out on her full knowledge of this tale for months. In obscure places. With full privacy spells in place.

“Removing the warding and the horcrux actually helped the boy. His magical core stabilized immediately – at fifteen months of age – and has been growing at one percent per hour since then....”

“An hour!”

“By the time he’s twenty, he’ll be more powerful – in a raw power sense – than even Merlin was reputed to be. The ancient ‘lost’ magics might be possible again for someone with that potential....”

“Is there any danger of so rapid growth?” Greengrass-Smythe asked.

Merlinda shook her head. “No. His core is more refined, more stable than any adult under thirty I’ve ever met. Whatever freak of magic happened to save the tyke from the Killing Curse has also gifted him with this ridiculous potential. If I didn’t know better, I’d say some god was guiding him along....”

“There is a prophecy,” a bland man called Bode said. “It’s likely about the Potter child. About him vanquishing the Dark Lord.”

Merlinda nodded and continued. "I stand corrected. Magic had need of a champion and so she created one."

Most of the room began speaking or muttering or trying to work out how this all might work.

This time Merlinda didn't bother to quiet the room. When it fell silent, she finished her report. "Of course, the boy has attracted my attention, so I will be claiming him as a long-term project. I'll likely break cover and begin a romantic relationship with Sirius Black to insert myself into the household. It's no bother, he's fairly handsome in any case. As for Harry Potter, I fully expect to try to poach him for our group after he leaves Hogwarts."

"Hear, hear." More than one in the room said.

Merlinda smiled once more and thought of her dear, dead father, that bastard Abraxus. Her birth name had been Merlinda Malfoy until Abraxus arranged for his first wife's death and Merlinda's expulsion from the family.

What would Lucius – the snotty little brother she never knew – think of the Malfoy family under her direction? With Harry Potter at the vanguard.

Malfoys bow to no one. She was expelled as a bastard, but she still lived the credo. She would remind her idiot half-brother about bowing to a Dark Lord. She would help raise, and empower, his conqueror.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A short, slight man wearing green robes opened the door and walked inside. He was a government solicitor, a bachelor, and as drab and personality-less as anyone who worked in the building. He was also in charge of deciphering the moderately confusing Potter will.

"Good day," he said after he took his seat behind a dented table, "my name is Albert Trusk. We have a few problems we need to address before we can wrap the disposition of the will and the estate."

He pointed at Sirius, who was holding Harry, "You're Sirius Black."

Sirius nodded.

He pointed to the woman next to Sirius. "You are?"

"I am Linda Kent, Sirius' girlfriend."

"Fine."

"I am Alphonse Bracken, a solicitor for Narcissa Malfoy."

Trusk looked perturbed. "You are not party to these proceedings, I don't think, nor your client...."

"My client wishes to make her voice known."

Sirius looked like he wanted to say something horrible about his cousin, but held his tongue at the last moment.

Trusk moved on. "And you, ma'am?"

The old woman in the back of the room stopped knitting for a moment and looked up. "I was invited. My name is Evangeline Silsbury."

"Yes, quite right. When you didn't Floo to confirm...well, no matter. I guess we're just waiting on...."

The door opened and a trio of goblins walked into the room carrying in a large rug or wall hanging. They set it on the floor and promptly departed.

"Thank you," Trusk said after they'd shut the door. "Surly little creatures," he muttered, loud enough for everyone but Evangeline to hear.

"What's the confusion then?" Sirius asked, trying to sound polite and well read and not succeeding at either. He got remarkably little sleep with little Harry having nightmares most nights.

“Let me read to you from the will the relevant section on guardianship. ‘Given the vagaries of war, Lily and I ask the surviving people on this list to either accept guardianship or help appoint a responsible magical family to protect and nurture our son, Harry: Albus Dumbledore, Sirius Black, Frank Longbottom....’”

“Where is Frank?” Sirius asked.

“Still in St. Mungo’s recovering. He sent me a written statement of his views, however. The rest follows, ‘...Catton Wilson, and Evangeline Silsbury.’”

Sirius blinked as he digested the words. “So why was Dumbledore trying to give Harry to Petunia Dursley when he was killed?”

Few people knew this story, but Sirius had heard it directly from Minerva McGonagall.

“It would be contrary to the will,” Trusk said. “Perhaps that’s why he had it sealed?”

Sirius decided then and there to pay a visit to Dumbledore’s grave in his animagus form and relieve himself. Fully.

“Who is Catton Wilson?” Narcissa’s solicitor asked.

Trusk looked unhappy at the source of the question. “He perished some months ago, but he was a distant cousin to James Potter.”

Narcissa’s lawyer asked, “And what relation is Evangeline Silsbury to this matter?”

“I am,” the old woman said, pushing herself forward on her chair, “the squib sister of Henry Potter. James is – was – my nephew. I was also James’ nanny for a time growing up.”

Everyone looked surprised at that revelation. A squib – a living squib – in one of the oldest pureblood lines. Walburga Black would be in tears if she could hear this. Sirius was glad his mother had taken to remaining confined in her awful mansion.

“Well, Dumbledore has passed as has Mr. Wilson. Mr. Longbottom has expressed his wishes. I say we’re down to Mr. Black and Ms. Silsbury. Mr. Bracken, would you care to pass along Narcissa Malfoy’s instructions?”

The solicitor rose and nodded at Trusk. “She wished to put her name into contention for guardianship. She has a young son around Harry Potter’s age and she believes she is as qualified to care for two children as for one. Her lineage is equal in merit to Mr. Black’s – as is her genealogical relationship to the Potter family. Thank you.”

The solicitor sat back down.

Sirius began to laugh. “You think...I would trust Cissy...with a child? With my godson?”

Linda seemed offended at the very idea. Evangeline sat forward and glared at the solicitor.

Trusk stepped into this mess, “With two of the three votes solidly against the idea, I think you’re out of luck, Mr. Bracken. If you’d leave the proceedings now, thank you.”

The solicitor frowned but got up and left. The man had to know that this was a waste of his time. But the wealthy got what they wanted, even if it meant wasting people’s time. A service provider billed for his time whether or not he was successful.

Trusk looked at the two principles still in the room. “Now that we’re alone, Mr. Longbottom indicated that he would be willing to care for Mr. Potter as soon as he and his wife are out of hospital. He also indicated he supported Sirius Black as guardian or anyone else the will named.”

“I wish to take care of Harry,” Sirius said. Linda Kent stroked his arm in support.

“I wish to help take care of Harry,” Evangeline Silsbury said. Even Trusk looked surprised at this. The woman looked to be one hundred.

“Why?” the government solicitor asked.

“He’s the last magical Potter. I cared for his father because I loved my brother and my family. They supported me in a muggle school, paid for my university, and supported me while I was teaching in muggle schools. I did two thirty year stints as a teacher, only taking a four year break to help with James. I love children and would like to be involved in his care.”

“Mr. Black?”

Sirius shrugged. “I don’t know you, Ms. Silsbury....”

“Mrs. Mrs. Silsbury. My husband, Donald, passed away twenty-five years ago.”

Sirius stood and began to pace a bit. “Right, Mrs. Silsbury. But, if you wish to help....”

“I wish to be appointed co-guardian.”

Sirius, Linda, and Trusk all looked surprised. Sirius opened his mouth, but Evangeline beat him.

“Those Gringotts goblins brought the Potter Family Tapestry, didn’t they? Open it up. Take a look at the precedence. A squib in the direct line has precedence over a distant cousin, even if he’s magical. I’m being reasonable, here, I only want co-guardianship. But...if you push it, I’ll ask for more.”

Sirius went to the Tapestry and rolled it open. It was nowhere near as large or gnarled as the Black Tapestry, but it went back even further in history.

Sirius found Evangeline’s name, the name of her dead husband, and of the woman’s two dead children, a stillborn girl, and a boy who died at age seven.

Sirius looked over at the woman. “The last attempt by Grindelwald to take over Gringotts in London resulted in my sterility and the death of my son. Happy?”

Sirius took a moment to consider his options. An old woman wished to assist in the raising of a small child who had enormous stamina. She’d be a help, rather than a burden, Sirius hoped. “I accept the request. I will be guardian and Evangeline will be co-guardian. Harry will live with me...and she may visit when she cares to.”

The old woman nodded and smiled.

Trusk also smiled, happy that this knotty mess was handled.

“I will draw up the papers and we can be finished in an hour.” He got up and left the room.

Sirius turned to James Potter’s nanny and said, “It’ll sound weird, but I have to ask. Did James ever pee on you?”

The old woman went red for a moment and then began to laugh. “His first nickname – one he loathed – was Whizzer.”

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

One week after the rescue mission to Longbottom Manor, Aurors on surveillance discovered Lucius Malfoy was once again in his manor. Where he’d been for the past six days, no one yet knew.

Amelia had a thirty-two person crew in the ready room for the final briefing. They were using four portkeys and attacking from four sides simultaneously.

After losing four Aurors saving the Longbottom family, she wasn’t messing around with Malfoy who was savvier than the Lestranges if less gifted with torture curses.

“One final comment. It’s possible that the wife and child are at the manor, along with house elves. Stun first, but be careful of the infant.

After the blow we took because of Crouch and his Death Eater son, we do not need accusations of us murdering children. Right?"

The group departed moments later. Each of the four teams had a portkey, a combat-certified cursebreaker, two large ward sappers, and seven Aurors. Amelia was the leader at the northeast corner.

Her cursebreaker got the sappers started and began his ward-shattering chant. It took three minutes before the wards weakened enough for a penetration bridge spell to work. Amelia cast it and held it long enough for her team to enter underneath the rapidly dissolving wards.

They were old wards, but poorly designed. Probably expensive and considered state of the art two hundred years ago, but magic evolved, even if the Malfoys did not. She saw two other teams penetrate the wards. The final team was blocked by the Manor itself from her line of sight.

She was the last of her team to breach the manor. They stayed together in a compact grouping. Collins found and stunned a house elf in a library. They cleared the first floor and joined up with Jacobs team as they headed upstairs. As they were about off the staircase, she saw the other two teams join up and head downstairs...into a dungeon, presumably.

In the third room on the right, they found Narcissa. She said her husband wasn't home. Amelia stunned the woman.

Draco was at the other end of the Manor being tended by a battered-looking house elf. Both were hit with sleeping charms. One of the Aurors remained behind to keep an eye on the child.

Amelia gestured them to the third floor when an explosion rocked the manor. The entire crew rushed down the stairs, a few jumping off them and casting lightening spells to retard the effect of gravity.

The team that had gone downstairs was injured, that much was obvious. But so was Lucius Malfoy. He had set off some kind of prepared explosive potion or something and was now fighting the two

Aurors who remained on their feet. Amelia rushed in and began to duel with the man.

He smiled a villain's smile and pulled out a dagger from his belt with his left hand. It was obviously a magical item, enchanted in some way.

He lunged toward her, stabbing with one hand and casting with the other.

Her Slicing Spell hit his shoulder but was absorbed by whatever armor he was wearing. The revolting purple-brown spell he cast silently splashed into the stone wall...next to a prison cell...in the basement of his manor house. The stone began to melt. Lucius stabbed at her with the dagger, but it didn't penetrate her armor.

Amelia responded with a blinding curse. "You helped kill my brother."

"You just prove that, you degenerate bitch. The Wizengamot will never convict me." He demonstrated his contempt with a permanent depilation spell aimed at her head.

They cast and dodged for a few more minutes. Amelia's crew cleared out the wounded and set up a cordon. With as physical as their fight was, any interference could harm Amelia. They were ready to cast at the first opportunity.

They never got it.

Lucius cast a spray of acid at her, hitting the left side of her face. She gritted down and cast another Slicing Curse. Lucius dodged, but not enough. His right eye and a good portion of the top of his head slid off from the rest of his body and fell to the floor. He fell a moment later.

Only after she watched this traitor die, did Amelia succumb to unconsciousness.

'Edgar, you're avenged,' was her last thought.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Wizengamot members, only eighteen in number, filed into their massive chamber and took their seats. The pomp was dealt with quickly and Griselda Marchbanks got straight to the pending old business.

“The committee on new laws has amended a proposal introduced two days ago.” By which Griselda meant that she had personally revised it. “I will read the entirety of the brief statute now.

“The Magical Security Statute of 1981

“Whereas, the Voldemort Insurrection has exposed numerous weaknesses in the safety and security of our people, the Wizengamot resolves and adopts these new laws:

“Act I: The Court of Magical Law requires its members and the employees of its Ministry of Magic, including all subdivisions, to swear a magical oath composed of the following commitments: ‘I swear upon my magic to resign any and all offices or relationships with the Ministry of Magic or any of its units before I may join up with or offer material or informational support to any person or organization professing to destabilize or terrorize our civilization or any segment of it. I swear upon my magic to use none of the things I’ve learned between the date of my employment with the Ministry and my leaving it in support of any person or organization professing to destabilize or terrorize our civilization or any segment of it.’

“Act II: Any employee or prospective employee who refuses to swear the oath prescribed in Act I shall be terminated from employment.

“Act III: The Ministry of Magic dissolves the Banned Dark Magic Register and moves all former spells, potions, and rituals to the Register of Controlled Magical Activities.

“Act IV: Any employee or other citizen learning magic regulated by the Ministry under the Register of Controlled Magical Activities must swear the following oath: ‘I swear upon my magic to use this magic against another witch or wizard only in protection of myself, other witches or wizards, or property I may own. If I use this magic, I will register the use within 36 hours at the Ministry of Magic.’

Unauthorized persons, or those who have not sworn this oath, may not participate in any Controlled Magical Activity.

“Act V: Monitoring equipment shall be used to track all usage of Controlled Magical Activities. Those citizens who do not comply with Act IV will be subject to a minimum of one year in a prison environment and a fine of not less than five thousand galleons for each improper use of a Controlled Magical Activity.”

Griselda smiled and opened the floor to questions. The first one was “What the blazes does that mean?”

Griselda set down the parchment she’d been reading from. “It means there are no more Unforgivables. We opened the door for the Aurors to use them, now we have to make sure they are used the right way. All of them are now Ministry Regulated spells and can be taught and used by licensed persons...who must report when they use them under pain of losing their magic. The Obliviation spell and manufacture of veritaserum falls under this new law, too. Likewise, all Ministry employees, including the teachers at Hogwarts and the Healers at St. Mungo’s, may keep their jobs so long as they don’t have split loyalties.”

The debate went on for a long time. A few voices said it was too harsh. Others said it wasn’t harsh enough. But people came around, amendments were suggested, and the bill moved back into committee for revision. Griselda would resubmit it for a vote on the following Monday.

“It is time to begin the judicial portion of the meeting. Aurors, restun Peter Pettigrew, he’ll be second on the docket, and bring in the prisoner Severus Snape.”

A pale angry man emerged into the courtroom. He was bound into the chair and looked up at his judges. He saw none of his former colleagues – on either side of the conflict. Where was Dumbledore? Had the promise of reprieve been a lie?

“Auror Clements, administer the truth serum.”

Snape had his mouth forced open and a potion he knew well, as a brewer, forced onto his tongue. He'd never tasted it before. Surprisingly it didn't have much of a taste. So useful, he realized, and truly tasteless. The brewer of this batch knew what he was doing....

"Mr. Snape? Auror, get that man's attention."

Snape felt the punch to his stomach. He looked up with tears in his eyes.

"What?"

"Did you take the Dark Mark willingly?"

It was an inelegant formulation of a standard question. But Snape was in too much turmoil to try to work around the truth aid. "Yes."

"Did you kill a witch or a wizard while a Death Eater?"

"No."

That got a few Elders talking.

"What was your purpose then?"

"I drilled and trained like the others, but I also spent time brewing potions."

"What kind of potions?"

"A variety of healing and medical potions, the inferius ritual potion in large quantity, plus truth serums and experimental combat potions. Most of them had no name as yet."

Griselda Marchbanks was slower to ask her next question. "So you know how to raise an inferius?"

"I know part of the procedure."

That admission alone condemned him. The questioners moved on to other matters. Half an hour into the trial, Amelia Bones began to ask her questions. Snape tried to look at her and wondered what had happened to the woman. Half her face was still wrapped in bandages and her voice had a rasp to it that sounded unhealthy.

“Mr. Snape, who did you work most closely with in the Death Eaters?”

Snape began to name his colleagues responsible for brewing. He named the trainers who drilled him in his dark or otherwise permanent curses. He named forty-one names, several of whom were still unknown to Amelia Bones, the new Director of Magical Law Enforcement.

“Do you have anything to say in mitigation of your crimes?” Bones asked.

He nodded. “I became a spy among the Death Eater ranks for Albus Dumbledore.”

At that unexpected admission, she took a moment to recollect her thoughts. She also had time to ponder Dumbledore. Why had the man run an underground militia when he had all the power he needed as Head of the Wizengamot to enforce his will, empower the Aurors, and win the war? Hero complex? “When?”

“In August 1980. The seventeenth.”

“What information did you provide to him?”

“Ask him,” Snape said, fighting for his life, for his free will. “He will tell you.”

She shook her head. “Albus Dumbledore perished on 1 November, the day after Voldemort was defeated.”

Snape went pale. His lips refused to open again, even when asked other questions.

It was taken as evidence of him lying about his spying activities.

He got a sentence of forty years in Azkaban. He didn't even notice when he was chunked into the holding cell.

His mind couldn't stop thinking about Dumbledore being dead. Of all the scenarios he had considered, that hadn't been one of them. Dumbledore killing Voldemort, yes. Voldemort killing Dumbledore, yes. Them killing each other, yes. Many variations of that. But, to survive the war and then die afterward...after the Dark Lord was dead. His mind, loop-like, could not break free from his incomprehension.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

The Commission on Dark Lords was formed by Millicent Bagnold three months after Harry Potter received his scar. She appointed one historian – not a ghost –, two Aurors, two surviving victims, one Healer, three Wizengamot Elders, one genuine Imperius conscript, and Albus Dumbledore's disreputable brother, Aberforth.

It took them a year, and seven solicitors on staff, to sift through all the evidence. Then they spent another six months debating behind closed doors about what it all meant.

Their final set of recommendations came out on Harry Potter's fourth birthday.

Bagnold herself read a selection from the report on the Wizarding Wireless that afternoon. She started with the preface entitled "How We Lost":

"We stunned them, adjudicated them, and put them into a prison. They raped, robbed, exploded, and murdered anyone who stood in their way or anyone who caught their fancy. We had twenty thousand innocents, some of them well trained in combat; at their peak, they had one hundred fifty seven, all of whom drilled in combat curses and tactics. We operated within laws of combat; they took every law we had and did the exact opposite. We deliberated our actions and policies amongst a large group with a number of known traitors, at least a quarter of the Wizengamot, taking part in the discussion; the would-be Dark Lord kept his discussions among a narrow, trusted

group of advisors. We responded to their terrorist attacks; they picked and chose the venues of this war. We never acted on the intelligence we gathered, never preempted a single attack, never arrested a single witch or wizard unless we stunned them in battle; they went to the homes of our Aurors, our leaders, and the voices calling out for greater action and murdered and silenced them. We lost the war, save for a freak occurrence of magic, as we were on our last legs; they very nearly won. We did everything we could to fail; they really only needed to wait for us to succeed at that limited task.”

All those who had been listening at home with half hearted interest now paid closer attention. People had been expecting a dry report, they hadn’t been expecting something like this.

The preface gave way to the first chapter of the report which summarized the key problems. Most people would spend some time pondering one issue in particular:

“Eight students were expelled from Hogwarts in the last decade for violence or threats of violence: all eight of them turned up in Voldemort’s ranks. Expulsion from school and the snapping of a wand is not sufficient in a time of war, even for school children. We intend to train well rounded witches and wizards, but anyone capable of using a wand can become a soldier if he or she chooses. The ability to wield magic, especially offensive magic, is a gift of magic and a privilege under law. It is not a right or an inborn entitlement. We must not continue to treat it as so. Those students who bully or attack in the schoolyard will continue to do so as adults, especially if it is easy to steal a new wand. But...what if their knowledge of performing magic was removed from them. What then? Would Voldemort have been as strong without his schoolyard bullies? Without those previously convicted of magical offenses as early adults?”

The talk of removing the ability to perform magic from convicts had some people applauding and a smaller, more vocal group screaming in protest. Not all of them were criminals or would-be criminals, either.

A few were Jewish witches and wizards who had watched what Hitler had done to the Muggles. A few others were considered oddly liberal

in their political view – and naïve because they hadn't lost anyone in the war.

But attitudes changed as the chapter went into detail about Voldemort and his upbringing, Grindelwald and his rise to power, and several others.

Nearly every witch and wizard hung on Bagnold's words as she enumerated the summary of proposed changes:

"1. All magical children agree to a written oath, prior to beginning schooling, that limits their ability to use offensive or other potentially dangerous magic unless in defense of self, others, or property. The oath can be abrogated for any graduate who takes a position with a Ministry of Magic offensive or defensive force.

"2. The Ministry implements a system for locating destitute pureblood, abandoned halfblood, and orphaned muggleborn children in order for them to be fostered in willing wizarding homes, rather than left in unhappy or untenable situations. We do not support the creation of a wizarding orphanage.

"3. Reforms to the Wizengamot itself so that those who feel left out of the political system might have a better chance of changing the system from within, rather than levying war to change it from without.

"4. Separation of the duties of a militia and a police force. The Auror Corps will remain the policing force of our society, but the Ministry Magical Corps, formed by willing hitwizards, will become our military force in case of internal insurrection or attempted outside invasion. Our soldiers must be professional and well trained to protect us; our Aurors must focus on their investigations and arresting criminals. They are different jobs.

"5. We must bolster our educational standards, particularly in the wanded magical subjects, so that never again can a force of one hundred fifty nearly topple a civilization of twenty thousand. At a bare minimum, witches and wizards must be trained and confident to defend themselves while awaiting assistance or to escape from would-be attackers.

“6. The Ministry of Magic must invest in a renaissance for the warding arts in our civilization. So many families perished because they had inadequate wards – or no wards at all – protecting their homes and businesses. A witch or wizard in possession of powerful wards will allow a better defense in case of future Dark Lords.

“7. The Ministry of Magic must develop magic and procedures to rapidly respond to magical attacks committed on our witches and wizards. Notification and response times in the past wars have been abysmal, so new types of magic must be created for the future.”

Bagnold closed her address by noting that copies of the full report would be available starting the following morning for seven knuts per copy. The book became an unexpected bestseller.

The Wizengamot, of course, never changed its procedures or made itself more open, but it did adopt a version of all the other recommendations, however weak they might have been.

In the decades to follow, the most successful would be the student oaths and the Ministry sensor grids. The least used would be the Ministry-sponsored home warding program, mainly because several entrepreneurs woke up and began offering their services.

They did a better, more comprehensive job than the Ministry did. And they didn't keep copies of their schema in a large, relatively open government building. If nothing else, Voldemort succeeded in instilling a bit of paranoia in everyone he touched, directly or indirectly.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A stunning blonde woman sat beside a well made bed with a small blond boy tucked into it. He sat entranced at the story he heard. It was his favorite one in all the world.

“...and the Dark Lord named him his right hand. And Lucius went out and began to learn where the filth lived. He got his soldiers to go and destroy the filth. The Dark Lord was very happy with your father. And

he gifted him with a special diary, Draco. One of these days, you will use this diary as it was intended and recall the Dark Lord....”

“Like Daddy was supposed to do?”

“Yes, Draco. You will finish your father’s good works, but I reserve vengeance on Amelia Bones. On the day you stand triumphant, I will bring out Amelia Bones in chains from our dungeon and behead her in front of all the witched and wizards of the world, our subjects.”

The boy had a wide, happy grin on his face. “And the Dark Lord will reward us?”

Narcissa nodded.

“Can he bring back Daddy?”

“That is an excellent question. You should ask him after you restore the Dark Lord to his body, my Dragon.”

“And when can I go to Hogwarts?”

She shook her head. “You, Draco, will go to a better school, Durmstrang. It’s why you’re already learning German.”

“Did you go to Durmstrang?”

“No, you know I didn’t. But Hogwarts was different when I was young. Now it is infested with blood traitors and muggleborn trash.”

Draco’s face gritted up in disgust. “Oh, that’s bad. Can I be the one to cleanse it?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps. Your Daddy was just about to get a seat on the Board of Governors for that once great school, but now a more forceful approach will be needed to clean out the muck.”

“Muck, yuck!”

Narcissa smiled and laughed, pleased at her son's small joke. "Exactly right. Have you had enough stories this evening?"

"I want to hear what Aunt Bella did to the mudbloods in the dungeons!"

"Really now? Two stories?"

"Yes, please."

Narcissa shrugged. "Well. I suppose. Your Aunt Bellatrix was a most beautiful and brilliant young woman. She mastered the Cruciatus Curse at the age of thirteen. My mother was so proud and she even had Aunt Walburga singing her praises...."

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

Harry Potter, age eleven, walked into King's Cross Station. His godfather pushed the cart with his things on it. Aunt Linda had her twin girls in her arms. And Harry's three additional cousins, ages seven, five, and four, followed along, pointing at things and whispering to each other.

Harry had signed his magical oath four weeks earlier and was looking forward to starting at Hogwarts. He already knew a lot about magic, even if Sirius hadn't let him play with his holly and phoenix feather wand much.

He was excited for his magical traditions class that Headmaster Flitwick had told him about – and Sirius had filled his mind with idea for Transfiguration 'enrichment.' But he thought he would probably like Charms the best – it was the widest range of magic, after all, and he knew from a young age that he was very magical.

Aunt Linda took him aside about once a month to test his magic. She always seemed so pleased. "You're just growing like a weed, little Harry, outside and in. You will be a great wizard just as soon as we can get you trained up," she often said to him.

Indeed, she had even encouraged him to help when Sirius had the old wards taken down on their new home and recast. Harry had been nine, then, and had drawn a number of triangles and squares on pieces of slate. He didn't know what a ward anchor was, but Linda knew why her home was the most secure private dwelling in Britain. Sirius thought it was because he'd paid the goblins so well.

Innocence, Merlina thought, was bliss for her beloved husband and wonderful children. Work as she was doing now was often a dangerous, nasty chore, but she wouldn't have wanted her life to go any other direction. She, to her surprise, adored having children. She was considering stopping her contraceptive potion and starting on another, perhaps a boy child.

Sirius steered his beloved godson toward Platform 9. The boy had often begged to come and visit, just to see the Hogwarts Express, but Sirius insisted that some things needed to be savored and enjoyed only at the proper moment.

Harry caught sight of a tall blonde woman and a shorter blond woman heading toward Platform 4, where Platform 4 7/8 was located and the Tintagel Express, the only magical train to head directly to the coast, could be caught.

Malfoys.

Sirius and Linda had both had a lot to say about that family. They used cautious, measured language, but Harry was smart, even deciphering adult-speak.

He watched them until they disappeared into the crowds. Harry looked up and noticed that both Sirius and Linda had watched them, too.

"He's not going to Hogwarts, is he?"

"With my cousin in charge of his life? I think not," Sirius said. "Durmstrang or Bust is her new motto."

Harry nodded.

Linda juggled her girls for a moment before adding her thoughts. "I don't doubt you'll meet young Malfoy at some point. Probably across from each other on a battlefield...."

"Linda," Sirius scolded, but not too harshly. The boy was still a boy. Very bright, set up to begin absorbing magical knowledge like a thirsty sponge, but a boy. Best not to fill his head with prejudice...the way Narcissa almost certainly had with her little monster.

"Oh, stuff it, Sirius," Linda said. "Harry has few illusions of the world. He knows about the dangers and we shouldn't try to hide or minimize them."

"Bah, let the boy enjoy life. Quidditch and eating desserts and...chasing cute little girls in the library."

"Gross," Harry said, firmly into his 'no-girls-welcome' phase.

Linda nudged Harry through the barrier to the secret platform, then followed. The children came through – "no fair," Harry thought – with Sirius pushing the cart at the end of the procession.

The platform was crowded. Very crowded.

Harry recognized Neville Longbottom and his parents. Then there was Susan Bones and her Aunt. He knew enough not to ask about the woman's blue spinning eyeball, but she was a nice woman otherwise.

He felt Sirius wrap his arms around his shoulders. Harry tried to turn and return the gesture, but Sirius held him tight. "Just look, Harry. Just look. I met your father on this platform when I was eleven – my best friend, a friend of a lifetime – and did something stupid, snotty. Then I came to my senses on the train and went to apologize. He accepted it and we began to chat. That's how simple it was for us."

Harry smiled. "I know, Godfather."

“I’m just reminding you. Don’t be too good now, Harry. Give your Aunt and your cousins hugs before you go find Neville or Ernie.”

Harry did. The littler kids squirmed a bit when he did his bit, hugging them, but he did it anyway.

“Alright there, Harry? I’ll just put your trunk in the luggage car. You can go and find Neville.”

He moved to run into the crowd, but paused and turned his head. “You’ll send Hedwig with a letter for me tomorrow?”

“Of course,” Linda said. “I’d never force an owl to ride in a train. Rather cruel. Don’t forget to write a letter for your Aunt Evangeline. You know how she likes to hear from you.”

That got two quick nods from Harry. “I will. Thanks.”

Harry smiled and waved and ran off to his future. He greeted the people he knew. Sirius and Linda watched him disappear into the crowd, but they did see him pull Neville onto the train.

“Time passed so quickly,” Sirius said.

“He’ll be fine, Sirius. He’ll be safe and happy there, you know it.”

“He looks so much like James did. But...his personality is all his own. He’s brave and bookish. Clever little bugger.”

“Quite,” Linda said. She felt a tugging on her sweater and saw that all three of her ambulatory children were ready to leave.

“Wave goodbye, Sirius, and we can beat the mad rush out of this place.”

Sirius smiled and waved – and got a wave in return from Harry. He walked to the luggage car and put Harry’s trunk aboard. When he walked back, Linda was talking with Molly Weasley, who was just now coming through. Her children, little better than a bunch of Vikings in a wealthy hamlet, were screaming on their way to the train. Sirius

wondered if he had been as annoying as either twin when he was that age.

He realized he'd probably been worse.

"Off we go, then. Johnathan, you go first, take your sister's hand. There we go," Linda directed.

Sirius watched them move back out the portal. He cast his head back. Harry was in deep conversation with little Neville Longbottom. Funny.

He knew his godson had grown up well. But he had never had the heart to tell the boy about Albus Dumbledore or about Vernon Dursley, an angry squib two generations removed from the Crouch family. How one's man's hatred of magic had saved Harry.

What a muggle mess! What a new life!

Sirius stepped through the portal and knew Harry would be ready for whatever came his way.

X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X-X

A note in explanation: I believe many of Dumbledore's actions after the war were motivated by the Prophecy he so strongly believed in. He left Voldemort some followers to ease his return to power – rather than ensure they all died or went insane in Azkaban. No Dumbledore, as in this story, and you get a more secure world – not that I would want to live in the place I just painted for you. Rather too Orwellian for my tastes.